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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TALLINN 001084

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SUBJECT: ESTONIA: PRESIDENT ILVES'S TRIP TO GEORGIA

Classified By: DCM Jeff Goldstein for reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. On December 6, President Ilves's Foreign Affair Advisor, Sven Jurgenson, briefed us on Ilves's recent trip to Georgia. While in Tbilisi, Ilves emphasized to Georgian President Saakashvili the need for the GOG to reduce tensions with Russia and take a more pragmatic approach to EU and NATO membership. End Summary.

#### Relations with Russia

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¶2. (C) In a December 6 meeting with DCM, Sven Jurgenson, Foreign Affairs Advisor to President Toomas Hendrik Ilves, provided highlights from President Ilves November 22-23 trip to Tbilisi and gave his own perspective on the current situation in Georgia. Ilves's principal message to the GOG was the importance of reducing tensions between Georgia and Russia. Ilves told Saakashvili that based on Estonia's own experience in dealing with Russia, it is better to praise meetings with the GOR and avoid finger pointing or complaining about lack of progress in public. Jurgenson commented that the Georgians appeared to have followed Ilves advice "almost word for word" in a subsequent Georgian-Russian meeting in Minsk. He also opined that Speaker Burjanadze had surprised everyone at the Riga Summit when she offered conciliatory language regarding Russia.

¶3. (C) According to Jurgenson, the atmosphere in Georgia has improved over the last few weeks. Now, he said, people are not talking about an inevitable conflict with Russia, at least not in the immediate future. Still, Jurgenson said he sensed a palpable "siege mentality" in Tbilisi. Jurgenson said the Georgians told Ilves they will do their best not react to Russian provocations, but that for domestic political reasons it would be hard for them not to respond if the provocation is extreme, such as a large-scale kidnapping of Georgians in either South Ossetia or Abkhazia.

#### NATO and EU Membership

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¶4. (C) Ilves also discussed NATO and EU membership with Saakashvili and shared experiences from Estonia's accession process. Ilves tried to convince Saakashvili that Georgia needs to be more pragmatic and less dogmatic about its EU and NATO aspirations and realize that its close relationship with the United States is not a trump card. He urged Saakashvili to work with Europe, especially Germany, to build Georgia's credibility among the other EU member states and NATO allies. Jurgenson

expressed concern, however, that Saakashvili and other GOG officials are not absorbing constructive criticism regarding Georgia's shortcomings. "The Georgians have a tendency to hear only what they want to hear," Jurgenson explained, and reject messages they don't like or the messengers that bring them, even when they are friends.

15. (C) Jurgenson expressed his own apprehension about the Georgian tendency toward "paranoia" which were reflected in private comments some GOG officials made to him regarding setbacks in Georgia's NATO and EU membership efforts. These officials told him privately that they believe there are some European countries working against Georgia's accession and insinuated that senior U.S. State Department officials were "sowing doubts in European capitals" on Georgia's suitability for EU and NATO membership. Jurgenson told us he had personally chided his counterparts for expressing this attitude and told them that their paranoia would only hurt Georgia's aspirations.

Some reflections: reform, reform, reform  
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16. (C) Jurgenson also commented on the status of political and economic reform in Georgia. He said he was impressed by the progress the Georgians have made in implementing reforms, although many of the most difficult changes are still pending. He noted that in Estonia and all other eastern European countries, there is an inverse relationship between the rate of reform and the government's popularity, Jurgenson said. It was somewhat surprising, therefore, that Saakashvili remains so popular, although Jurgenson agreed that the lack of a strong opposition was part of the explanation. He also

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said, however, that Saakashvili remains popular in part by blaming cabinet members for unpopular and tough decisions while taking credit for the popular ones.

17. (C) With respect to corruption, Jurgenson said he believes Saakashvili has made some real progress, although he had been forced at times to use rather heavy-handed methods. Jurgenson said it was probably unrealistic to expect the staggering scale of corruption in Georgia could be eliminated without "getting one's hands dirty." However, in his opinion, Saakashvili and his government need to tread carefully so as to not undermine the rule of law.

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